

Real prospects of escalation in the Russian war against Ukraine (2nd edition)

This document is a short description of the findings and conclusions, which concern the topic of the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It goes through the most widely discussed escalation scenarios, their impact on policies and government decisions and assesses the probability of the most credible scenarios.

*The second edition of this document reflects the relevant events, such as **partial mobilisation in Russia**, the **annexation attempt** of four Ukrainian regions, and the questions raised by CMI experts during the call on 21.09.22.*

While preparing this paper, I used open-source materials, mainly the press articles published since 24/02/22, and personally collected information. That information was provided primarily through interviews and discussions with independent analysts, current and former government officials, and the military. References are provided in annexes. The conclusions are original.

In the context of this war, the term *escalation* can be defined as a dramatic intensification of military activities beyond the scale of the current conflict.

Escalation has been a very pressing topic during the whole course of the war. Escalation threats impact Ukrainian assistance policies of multiple countries, particularly the US Government ("USG"). The main concern is avoiding the transition of the war into a massive global conflict with numerous participants (sometimes referred to as World War III) and/or a nuclear war.

Some types of assistance were prohibited from providing to Ukraine due to perceived escalation risks. After carefully considering the strategic risks and operational dynamics, most restrictions have been revised over time. The special task force works with the White House administration analysing escalation risks. The exact algorithm is unclear; perhaps it evolves.

Russia has been threatening the world with escalation throughout the whole course of the war. It has constantly tried to stop or limit western support through the fear of nuclear conflict and a third world war. This rhetoric still appears in Russian officials' speeches regularly.

The escalation topic has returned to the front pages in recent weeks after the successes of Ukrainian forces, particularly the explosions in Crimea and the counteroffensive in Kharkiv. It has been a question of what a Russian response to those developments would be. It was excruciating for the Russian regime to acknowledge a lack of progress and defeats, mainly as Ukraine took a firm initiative.

Putin's answer has been partial mobilisation and illegal annexation of four regions: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. This decision seems to be very reckless. The mobilisation has caused massive concern in Russian society; it is highly unpopular. Losing an offensive war with mobilised citizens will seriously weaken Putin's regime.

The "annexations", however, look much more troubling. A short uplift gained through propaganda pushing the Russian "historical lands collection" narrative will be offset by grim reality. Putin has proclaimed Russia the areas still partly controlled by Ukraine and in which Russia loses its positions daily due to the Ukrainian counteroffensive. For example, the town of Lyman and surrounding villages have been gained by Ukrainian troops in just a day since the annexation. Losing "Russian" lands will be devastating for the regime's popularity.

Under no circumstances the Western governments should change their policies regarding resistance to the Russian invasion. Ukraine and the western coalition should aim for a defining victory. If annexations have a policy effect on any country, this will be a massive strategic mistake as it potentially confirms that illegal land grabs can be a way forward. Also, there must not be a blend

between Russian territories and annexed. We must have two approaches to military activities and retaliation in Russia and Ukrainian-occupied regions (including Donbas and Crimea).

However, as we can see, Western leaders do not demonstrate at least visible policy reductions towards Ukraine due to annexation. Moreover, annexations may influence their position regarding Crimea. If Crimea had any "special status" for many Western politicians and observers, who were reluctant to plan its military de-occupation, now it is just one of five illegally annexed areas. Ukraine is still serious about the unconditional de-occupation of Crimea.

The weakening of Russia's military and politics is very apparent. The full-scale campaign stumbled from the beginning, but it is evident today that Russia has reached its capabilities exhaustion level much sooner than many expected. As a result, a weaker Russia impacts overall stability around its borders in other parts of the world. For example, the ODKB format is no longer de facto, as we can see from the situations in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Moreover, India and China blame Russia for a protracted war negatively affecting the world.

The situation is quite promising for Ukraine as many have started to believe that victory is something achievable in the foreseeable future. Ukraine's successes drive public interest and further political and military support. At the same time, Putin's desperation will mean he is attempting to create more deadly scenarios to stay afloat.

Types of escalation. There always have been four types of possible escalation considered:

1. Conventional escalation, as Russia was supposed to substantially multiply the effort and increase its military presence in Ukraine using conventional forces.
2. International escalation as Russia involves other countries in the war. That includes a potential scenario of the Russian military aggression against NATO countries.
3. Economic or hybrid escalation (a recent addition). Russia substantially increases the efforts to damage the Ukrainian economy, people's resilience, and social life.
4. Nuclear (or other MWD) escalation, where Russia decides to use its nuclear armament to coerce Ukraine by causing nuclear explosions damage. Recently that scenario has also included staging a nuclear accident at a Ukrainian power plant(s).

A war against NATO.

According to all experts I interviewed, that scenario (if initiated by Russia through the military attack) does not seem realistic in the near future. Russia barely keeps it up in Ukraine; it will lose dramatically and quickly if NATO joins the war. On the contrary, most analysts consider the war against NATO to be the main deterrent for Russia against nuclear escalation.

However, the opinion that Russia cannot attack NATO is still not shared by all top-level officials (see an interview of Gen. Zorn, IG of Bundeswehr).

The analysis must distinguish the assessment of the possibility of the Russian planned military attack against NATO from the strategic risks of the confrontation between the West and Russia, which is exceptionally high. Strategically, Russia considers the West as its existential enemy. Thus strengthening Western conventional and hybrid capabilities to deter possible Russian military aggression is very important.

Nevertheless, USG considers direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO to be avoided by all means. The only exception for NATO's direct involvement can be perhaps in the case of nuclear escalation, as outlined below.

Conventional escalation

Most experts do not consider the possibility of further conventional escalation very high. Despite that Russian regime tries all possible options to increase its military potential. Those efforts include purchasing weapons from abroad (such as Iran drones), returning personnel and equipment from other areas (Syria, Kazakhstan) and 'creative recruitment' campaigns (such as Wagner recruiting prisoners). But those efforts do not change the situation on the battlefield dramatically, at least now.

Main reasons why the experts consider successful conventional escalation unlikely are the following:

1. The exhausted military potential of Russia. Russia has used up most of its capabilities and has lost thousands of major equipment systems.
2. Severe problems with hiring personnel to replenish casualties, which to our anticipation, had exceeded 100,000.
3. Russia is already escalating as much as it can. There is no reason for Russians not to apply their utmost efforts already. Russia may not have any escalation 'card' in its pocket except mobilisation.
4. Significant problems with stored weapons, most needing significant repairs before being used. Russian military-industrial complex works 24x7 but not enough to enhance new equipment inflow seriously.
5. The problems with remaining reserves and quality of high precision missiles. Russia cannot make lots of models due to tech sanctions.

Partial mobilisation announced on 21st September has been (by many opinions) the last attempt to escalate conventionally. A total mobilisation is still technically an option, though since partial mobilisation is not transparent, it can hide much larger numbers than the 300,000 announced. It is already highly unpopular in Russia, and mass mobilisation can worsen the situation.

Mobilisation also uncovers other problems of Russian capacity to transition mobilised personnel into the military capabilities: processing, resourcing, training, equipping, delivering, arming, and commanding.

Of course, Russia can resolve many of those issues if it has a long strategic pause, hence their constant complaints about the lack of negotiations. But Ukraine keeps pursuing its defence efforts for this reason – not to give Russia time to recover.

The annexation initiative campaign pursues the following goals to boost war support:

1. Regain initiative at least optically in the Russian information space.
2. Proclaim the regions as Russian territory and announce Ukraine's counteroffensive efforts as an offensive onto Russian territory and call the war defensive for Russia. Russian propaganda's offensive "special operation" will be converted into a defensive "patriotic war" against the West.
3. Claim an ability to use all means, including nuclear weapons.

We tend to believe that this approach will not change the overall strategic picture: Russian forces are still exhausted, and they lack progress. Moreover, they will not be able to become more efficient due to fundamental reasons. However, according to our sources, the mobilisation effect may partially work, but only if the proper training is organised during the next two or three months.

Economic escalation

A set of activities, sometimes called "economic escalation", is pretty straightforward and considered very likely by all experts. These include potential limitations of grain exports in the Black Sea, hitting the critical infrastructure, particularly energy and transportation, possible terrorist acts in central Kyiv and other large cities etc. However, we believe this would increase the continuation of current Russian attempts to coerce Ukraine with increased effort and focus on wintertime challenges.

Nuclear escalation

Nuclear escalation, of course, is a very different type of threat. Russia does all it can and is only constrained by its capabilities in the conventional sphere. On the contrary, Russia can cause significant damage to Ukraine in the nuclear domain but limits itself due to the expected consequences.

While assessing nuclear threats, we need to understand that we enter a game theory realm, thus being constrained by the assumption of rational thinking. But unfortunately, as we have seen, Putin is not always making reasonable decisions.

Also, as announced, USG has been sending messages to Putin threatening "catastrophic" consequences in case of nuclear escalation. However, we remember that the USG's attempts to deter Putin before the war did not work out. So also, the "strategic ambiguity" approach perhaps must be carefully analysed for the same reason.

Annexations made us seriously reconsider Putin's rational thinking as he essentially follows an "all-or-nothing" approach. There is a broad consensus among many analysts, particularly in Ukraine, that Putin will go as far as possible to avoid losing in the war. So the risks of nuclear escalation went up substantially.

Before considering nuclear weapons detonations possibility, we need to mention the hazardous option of staging an accident on the captured Zaporizhka plant or targeting other NPPs. Most observers believe this is a high-risk option. However, it would be challenging for Putin to avoid responsibility for that and blame Ukraine. The risk remains, though, as Putin clearly targeted at least three plants by now, and most likely, NPPs attacks have a unique role in his campaign plan.

Russia has at least 2000 tactical nuclear warheads it can use against Ukraine. How many of them are functional is unclear. Its Nuclear Doctrine allows it to use weapons in case of existential threats to the country. In this document, we do not pay much attention to Russian nuclear doctrine as 1) it has been extensively studied in publications; 2) Russia most likely will explain the attack regardless of the doctrine provisions.

The main reasons against using nuclear weapons are the following:

1. The battlefield benefits from those attacks are meagre and, in many cases, may damage Russian troops equally to Ukrainian. Making territorial gains in contaminated areas will be very difficult. Ukraine has successfully dispersed its military presence around the country and has no military targets worthy of a nuclear strike. Thus Russia has a problem even with finding a suitable target for a strike.
2. Ukrainian people will fight Russia regardless of any attacks. We overwhelmingly consider Russian occupation the worst of all scenarios.
3. It is impossible to execute an attack by the will of one person. Officers may not complete the nuclear launch order. Putin's close circles may sabotage the order hoping to gain power in the post-Putin regime and avoid international and domestic responsibility. [I think this argument is weak, though it is popular].

4. Using nuclear weapons will cause unprecedented international outrage. The West, East and Global South responses are unpredictable and likely very harsh. It launches an 'uncontrolled dynamic' for Putin. The countries whose support Putin seeks (China, India etc.) are categorically against nuclear wars and may walk away from providing any neutrality to Putin and even may join an extended pro-Ukrainian coalition.
5. Engagement of nuclear weapons will not be unnoticed; transportation of warheads will be spotted by Western intelligence. So the West will be able to prepare its response.
6. Using nuclear weapons without desired effect will destroy Russian great power credibility and is the worst option for them. Also, demonstration (such as nuclear detonation in the Black Sea, for example) with no ability to go to the next step will produce an opposite effect.
7. The West, particularly USG, will not be able to leave this without the harshest response possible, which Russia will most likely be unable to counter. It is a central argument against nuclear use, and we will address it again below.

The most significant deterrent for Putin, of course, is the western response. The general opinion is that the West will have to react accordingly. A senior administration official said any use of a "small" tactical nuclear bomb by Russia — even inside Ukraine and not directed at a NATO member — would mean that "all bets are off" on the United States and NATO staying out of the war. USG had sent numerous public messages to Putin to refer from using nuclear weapons.

Notably, US armed forces and allies have enough conventional capabilities to destroy a large chunk of the Russian military and disable its offensive. The West will not need to retaliate Russian nuclear strike with another nuclear strike. However, the US may damage the Russian military with its sophisticated conventional capabilities even without sending the US or other allied infantry to the region (electronic warfare, long-range missiles, combat aviation, cyber weapons, naval intrusion, etc.).

We sincerely hope that USG has outlined a truly "catastrophic" scenarios to the Russian government. As we previously discussed, the strategic ambiguity approach has already failed to work. Also, the symmetric retaliation policy (small detonation – minor reaction) will not perform as it practically allows the first small strike. A disproportionately harsh retaliation severely damaging Russian capabilities must be a very evident prospect for Putin.

Therefore deterring Russian nuclear threats has two possible scenarios:

1. With further conventional losses, Putin will desperately try to compensate them through nuclear escalation.
2. With further conventional losses, a perspective of quick and ultimate Russian defeat through retaliation becomes evident and thus deters nuclear escalation threats.

Thus, we have two exactly opposite scenarios. It is the effectiveness of retaliation threats that distinguishes them. Therefore planning and communicating the retaliation is critical for nuclear stability.

Summarising the facts and conclusions mentioned above, we can claim that the world has never been closer to a nuclear attack since the Caribbean crisis. However, it may be safe to suggest that all types of escalations will likely increase western support and Ukrainian resistance, contrary perhaps to the expectations of the Russian government. And it is a resolved and communicated response perspective that will define the possibility of nuclear escalation.

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